

Tahitian language

Tahitian (autonym *Reo Tahiti*, part of *Reo Mā 'ohi*, languages of French Polynesia)^[3] is a Polynesian language, spoken mainly on the Society Islands in French Polynesia. It belongs to the Eastern Polynesian group.

As Tahitian had no written tradition before the arrival of the Western colonists, the spoken language was first transcribed by missionaries of the London Missionary Society in the early 19th century.

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Tahitian	
<i>Reo Tahiti</i> <div><i>Reo Mā 'ohi</i></div>	
Native to	French Polynesia
Ethnicity	185,000 Tahitians
Native speakers	68,260, 37% of ethnic population (2007 census) ^[1]
Language family	<div>Austronesian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Malayo-Polynesian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Oceanic<ul style="list-style-type: none">Polynesian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Eastern Polynesian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Tahitic<ul style="list-style-type: none">Tahitian</div>
Official status	
Recognised minority language in	 French Polynesia
Language codes	
ISO 639-1	ty (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?iso_639_1=ty)
ISO 639-2	tah (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=435)
ISO 639-3	tah
Glottolog	tahi1242 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/id/tahi1242) ^[2]

Context

Tahitian is the most prominent of the indigenous Polynesian languages spoken in French Polynesia (*reo mā 'ohi*).^{[3][4]} The latter also include:^[5]

- Marquesan, spoken by about 8,000 people in the Marquesas Islands, with two sub-divisions, North-Western ('eo 'enana) and South-Eastern ('eo 'enata)
- Pa'umotu (*reo pa 'umotu*), spoken by about 4,000 people in the Tuamotu Islands
- Austral, spoken by about 3,000 people in the Austral Islands
- Rapa, spoken by about 400 people on Rapa Iti
- Ra'ivavae, spoken by about 900 people in the Austral Islands
- Mangareva, spoken by about 600 people in the Gambier Islands

History

When Europeans first arrived in Tahiti at the end of the 18th century, there was no writing system and Tahitian was only a spoken language. In 1797, Protestant missionaries arrived in Tahiti on a British ship called *Duff*, captained by James Wilson. Among the missionaries was Henry Nott (1774–1844) who learned the Tahitian language and worked with Pōmare II, a Tahitian king, to translate the English Bible into Tahitian. A system of five vowels and nine consonants was adopted for the Tahitian Bible, which would become the key text by which many Polynesians would learn to read and write.

Phonology

Tahitian features a very small number of phonemes: five vowels and nine consonants, not counting the lengthened vowels and diphthongs. Notably, the consonant inventory lacks any sort of dorsal consonants.

	<u>Labial</u>	<u>Alveolar</u>	<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Plosive</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>ʔ</u>
<u>Nasal</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>n</u>	
<u>Fricative</u>	<u>f</u> <u>v</u>		<u>h</u>
<u>Trill</u>		<u>r</u>	

Next follows a table with all phonemes in more detail.

letter	name	pronunciation		notes
		IPA	English approximation	
a	'ā	/a/, /aː~ɑː/	a : opera, ā : father	
e	'ē	/e/, /eː/	e : late, ē : same but longer	
f	fā	/f/	friend	becomes bilabial [ɸ] after o and u
h	hē	/h/	house	becomes [ʃ] (as in English shoe) after i and before o or u
i	'ī	/i/, /iː/	as in machine	may become diphthong <i>ai</i> in some words like <i>rahi</i>
m	mō	/m/	mouse	
n	nū	/n/	nap	
o	'ō	/o~ɔ/, /oː/	o : nought, ō : same but longer	
p	pī	/p/	sponge (not aspirated)	
r	rō	/r/	-	<u>alveolar trill</u> , may also be heard as a flap [ɾ]
t	tī	/t/	stand (not aspirated)	
u	'ū	/u/, /uː/	u : foot, ū : moo	strong lip rounding
v	vī	/v/	vine	becomes bilabial ([β]) after o and u
'	'eta	/ʔ/	uh-oh	<u>glottal stop</u> beginning each syllable

The glottal stop or 'eta is a genuine consonant. This is typical of Polynesian languages (compare to the Hawaiian 'okina and others). Glottal stops used to be seldom written in practice, but are now commonly written, though often as straight apostrophes, ' , instead of the curly apostrophes used in Hawaiian. Alphabetical word ordering in dictionaries used to ignore the existence of glottals. However, academics and scholars now publish text content with due use of glottal stops.

Tahitian makes a phonemic distinction between long and short vowels; long vowels are marked with macron or *tārava*.

For example, *pāto*, meaning "to pick, to pluck" and *pato*, "to break out", are distinguished solely by their vowel length. However, macrons are seldom written among older people because Tahitian writing was never taught at school until one or two decades ago.

Finally there is a *toro* 'a 'i, a trema put on the **i**, but only used in *ia* when used as a reflexive pronoun. It does not indicate a different pronunciation. Usage of this diacritic was promoted by academics but has now virtually disappeared, mostly due to the fact that there is no difference in the quality of the vowel when the trema is used and when the macron is used.

Although the use of 'eta and *tārava* is equal to the usage of such symbols in other Polynesian languages, it is promoted by the *Académie tahitienne* and adopted by the territorial government. There are at least a dozen other ways of applying accents. Some methods are historical and no longer used. This can make usage unclear. See list (http://www.farevanaa.pf/theme_detail.php?id=5). At this moment l'Académie tahitienne seems to have not made a final decision yet whether the 'eta should appear as a small normal curly comma (') or a small inverted curly comma ('). (Compare 'okina.) The straight apostrophe (Unicode U+0027) being the default apostrophe displayed when striking the apostrophe key on a usual French AZERTY

keyboard, it has become natural for writers to use the straight apostrophe for glottal stops, though to avoid the complications caused by substituting punctuation marks for letters in digital documents, the salttillo (') may be used.

Tahitian syllables are entirely open, as is usual in Polynesian languages. In its morphology, Tahitian relies on the use of "helper words" (such as prepositions, articles, and particles) to encode grammatical relationships, rather than on inflection, as would be typical of European languages. It is a very analytic language, except when it comes to the personal pronouns, which have separate forms for singular, plural and dual numbers.

Today, macronized vowels and 'eta are also available for mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. People can download and install mobile applications to realize the macron on vowels as well as the 'eta.

Grammar

Personal pronouns

Like many Austronesian languages, Tahitian has separate words for inclusive and exclusive we, and distinguishes singular, dual, and plural.

Singular

- *Au* (*Vau* after "a", "o" or "u")^[1] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.php>) I, me: *'Ua 'amu vau i te i 'a* I have eaten the fish; *E haere au i te farehaapi 'ira ānānahi* I will go to school tomorrow.
- *'Oe* you: *'Ua 'amu 'oe i te i 'a* You have eaten the fish; *'Ua tu 'ino 'oe i tō mātou pere 'o 'o*^[2] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.php>) You damaged our car.
- *'Ōna/ 'oia* he, she: *'Ua 'amu 'ōna i te i 'a* He/she ate the fish; *E aha 'ōna i haere mai ai?* Why is she here/why did she come here?; *'Aita 'ōna i 'ō nei* He/she is not here.

Dual

- *Tāua* (inclusive) we/us two: *'Ua 'amu tāua i te i 'a* We (us two) have eaten the fish; *E haere tāua*^[3] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>) Let's go (literally 'go us two'); *'O tō tāua hoa tēi tae mai*^[4] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>) Our friend has arrived.
- *Māua* (exclusive) we/us two: *'Ua 'amu māua i te i 'a* We have eaten the fish; *E ho 'i māua 'o Titaua i te fare*^[5] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>) Titaua and I will return/go home; *Nō māua tera fare* That is our house.^[6] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>.)
- *'Ōrua* you two: *'Ua 'amu 'ōrua i te i 'a* You two ate the fish; *A haere 'ōrua*^[7] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>) You (two) go; *Nā 'ōrua teie puta* This book belongs to both of you.
- *Rāua* they two: *'Ua 'amu rāua i te i 'a* They (they two) have eaten the fish; *Nō hea mai rāua?* Where are they (they two) from?;^[8] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>.) *'O rāua 'o Pā tei fa 'aea i te fare*^[9] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>.) He/she and Pa stayed home.

Plural

- *Tātou* (inclusive) we: *'O vai tā tātou e tīa 'i nei?* Who are we waiting for/expecting?,[10] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>) *E 'ore tā tātou mā 'a e toe* There won't be any of our food more left.
- *Mātou* (exclusive) we, they and I: *'O mātou 'o Herenui tei haere mai*[11] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>)[12] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>) We came with Herenui; *'Ua 'ite mai 'oe ia mātou* You saw us/you have seen us.
- *'Outou* you (plural): *'A haere atu 'outou, e pe 'e atu vau* You (all) go, I will follow;[13] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>) *'O 'outou 'o vai mā tei haere i te tautai?*[14] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>) Who went fishing with you (all)?
- *Rātou* they/them: *'Ua mārō rātou ia Teina*[15] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>)[16] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>) They have quarrelled with Teina; *Nō rātou te pupu pūai a 'e*[17] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>) They have the strongest team.

Word order

Typologically, Tahitian word order is VSO (verb–subject–object), which is typical of Polynesian languages. Some examples of word order from ^[6] are:

- *tē tāmā 'a nei au* – "[present continuous] eat [present continuous] I", "I am eating"
- *'ua tāpū vau 'i te vahie* – "[perfective aspect] chop I [object marker] the wood", "I chopped the wood"
- *'ua hohoni hia 'oia e te 'ūrī* – "[perfective aspect] bite [passive voice] he by the dog", "He was bitten by the dog"

[**e mea marō te ha 'ari* – "Are thing dry the coconut", "The coconuts are dry"] [**e ta 'ata pūai 'oia* – "Is man strong he", "He is a strong man"]

Articles

Definite article

The article **te** is the definite article and means *the*. In conversation it is also used as an indefinite article for *a* or *an*.^{[6]:p.9}

For example;

- *te fare* – the house; *te tāne* – the man

The plural of the definite article *te* is **te mau**.

For example;

- *te mau fare* – the houses; *te mau tāne* – the men

Also, *te* may also be used to indicate a plural;

For example;

- *te ta 'ata* – can mean *the person* or *the people*

Indefinite article

E

The indefinite article is *e*

For example;

- *e ta 'ata* - a person [18] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>.)

The article *e* also introduces an indefinite common noun.

For example;

- *e ta 'ata* – a person
- *e vahine* – a woman
- *e mau vahine* – (many) women

In contrast, *te hō 'ē* means *a certain*. [19] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>.)

For example;

- *te hō 'ē fare* – a certain house

'O

The article *'o* is used with proper nouns and pronouns and implies *it is*.

For example;

- *'O Tahiti* – (It is) Tahiti
- *'O rātou* – (It is) they

Aspect and modality markers

Verbal aspect and modality are important parts of Tahitian grammar, and are indicated with markers preceding and/or following the invariant verb. Important examples are:

- *e*: expresses an unfinished action or state.

E hīmene Mere i teie pō: [20] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>.) ""Will sing Mary tonight", "Mary will sing tonight"

- *'ua*: expresses a finished action, a state different from a preceding state. [21] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire>.) [*'ua* does not indicate surprise]

'Ua riri au : "Angry I", "I am angry" [22] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.php>)

- *tē ... nei*: indicates progressive aspect.

Tē tanu nei au i te taro: "planting I [dir. obj. marker] the taro", "I am planting the taro"

[23] (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.>)

E tāere ana 'ōna "Always is late he", "He is always late"

- *i ... nei* indicates a finished action or a past state.

'Ua fānau hia 'oia i Tahiti nei "Was born she in Tahiti", "She was born in Tahiti"

- *i ... iho nei* indicates an action finished in the immediate past.

I tae mai iho nei 'ōna "He just came"

- *'ia* indicates a wish, desire, supposition, or condition.

'Ia vave mai! "Hurry up!"

- *'a* indicates a command or obligation.

'A pi 'o 'oe i raro! "Bend down!"

- *'eiaha* indicates negative imperative.

'Eiaha e parau! "Do not speak"

- *'Āhiri, 'ahani* indicates a condition or hypothetical supposition.

'Āhiri te pahī i ta 'ahuri, 'ua pohe pau roa ĩa tātou "If the boat had capsized, we would all be dead"

- *'aita* expresses negation.

'Aita vau e ho 'i mai "I will not return"

Vocabulary

Common phrases and words

Tahitian	English
<i>'la ora na</i>	hello, greetings
<i>haere mai, maeva, mānava</i>	welcome
<i>pārahi</i>	goodbye
<i>nana</i>	bye
<i>'ē</i>	yes
<i>'aita</i>	no
<i>māuruuru roa</i>	thank you very much
<i>māuruuru</i>	thanks
<i>e aha te huru?</i>	how are you?
<i>maita 'i</i>	well, good
<i>maita'i roa</i>	very good
<i>tāne</i>	man
<i>vahine</i>	woman
<i>fenua</i>	land
<i>ra 'i</i>	sky
<i>vai</i>	water
<i>auahi</i>	fire
<i>'amu</i>	eat
<i>inu</i>	drink
<i>pō</i>	night
<i>mahana</i>	day/sun
<i>moana</i>	ocean, sea
<i>e ua</i>	it's raining
<i>ua to'eto'e</i>	it's cold
<i>nehenehe</i>	beautiful
<i>'ori</i>	dance
<i>po'ia</i>	hungry
<i>hoa</i>	friend
<i>atau</i>	right
<i>auī</i>	left
<i>ni'a</i>	up
<i>raro</i>	down
<i>roto</i>	in
<i>rāpae</i>	out
<i>muri</i>	back
<i>ua here au ia 'oe</i>	I love you
<i>tumu rā'au</i>	tree

<i>a'a</i>	root
<i>tumu</i>	trunk
<i>'āma 'a</i>	branch
<i>rau'ere</i>	leaf
<i>pa'a</i>	rind
<i>mā'a hotu</i>	fruit
<i>'ōrapa</i>	square
<i>menemene</i>	circle
<i>'ōrapa maha roa</i>	rectangle
<i>porotoru</i>	triangle

Taboo names – *pi 'i*

In many parts of Polynesia the name of an important leader was (and sometimes still is) considered sacred (*tapu*) and was therefore accorded appropriate respect (*mana*). In order to avoid offense, all words resembling such a name were suppressed and replaced by another term of related meaning until the personage died. If, however, the leader should happen to live to a very great age this temporary substitution could become permanent.

In the rest of Polynesia *tū* means to stand, but in Tahitian it became *ti 'a*, because the word was included in the name of king *Tū-nui- 'ē 'a-i-te-atua*. Likewise *fetū* (star) has become in Tahiti *feti 'a* and *aratū* (pillar) became *arati 'a*. Although *nui* (big) still occurs in some compounds, like Tahiti-nui, the usual word is *rahi* (which is a common word in Polynesian languages for 'large'). The term *'ē 'a* fell in disuse, replaced by *purūmu* or *porōmu*. Currently *'ē 'a* means 'path' while *purūmu* means 'road'.

Tū also had a nickname, Pō-mare (literally means 'night coughing'), under which his dynasty has become best known. By consequence *pō* (night) became *ru 'i* (currently only used in the Bible, *pō* having become the word commonly in use once again), but *mare* (literally cough) has irreversibly been replaced by *hota*.

Other examples include;

- *vai* (water) became *pape* as in the names of Papeari, Papeno 'o, Pape 'ete
- *moe* (sleep) became *ta 'oto* (the original meaning of which was 'to lie down').

Some of the old words are still used on the Leewards.

See also

- Lord Monboddo
- Swadesh list of Tahitian words

Notes

1. Tahitian (<https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/tah/>) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
2. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). "Tahitian" (<http://glottolog.org/resource/linguoid/id/tahi1242>). *Glottolog* 3.0. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.

3. *Reo Mā 'ohi* correspond to "languages of natives from French Polynesia," and may in principle designate any of the seven indigenous languages spoken in French Polynesia. The Tahitian language specifically is called *Reo Tahiti* (See [Charpentier & François 2015](#): 106).
4. "Les Langues Polynésiennes" (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/arbre.php>). *Académie Tahitienne*. Retrieved 1 August 2010.
5. See [Charpentier & François \(2015\)](#).
6. Tryon, Darrell T. (1970). *Conversational Tahitian* (<https://archive.org/details/conversationalt000tryo>). University of California Press. ISBN 9780520016002. Retrieved 1 August 2010. "Tahitian language."

References

- Charpentier, Jean-Michel; François, Alexandre (2015). *Atlas Linguistique de Polynésie Française — Linguistic Atlas of French Polynesia* (http://alex.francois.free.fr/AF-Atlas-blurbs_e.htm) (in French and English). Mouton de Gruyter & Université de la Polynésie Française. ISBN 978-3-11-026035-9.
- Y. Lemaître, *Lexique du tahitien contemporain*, 1973. ISBN 2-7099-0228-1
- same; 2nd, reviewed edition, 1995. ISBN 2-7099-1247-3
- T. Henry, *Ancient Tahiti – Tahiti aux temps anciens*
- Darrell Tryon, *Conversational Tahitian*; ANU 1970

External links

- 1851 Tahitian–English dictionary (<https://archive.org/stream/tahitianenglishd00davrigh#page/n15>)
- 1898 Tahitian-French dictionary (<https://archive.org/stream/grammaireetdict00jausgoog#page/n9>)
- Tahitian Swadesh list of basic vocabulary words (https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Tahitian_Swadesh_list) (from Wiktionary's [Swadesh-list appendix](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Swadesh_lists) (https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Swadesh_lists))
- Académie Tahitienne – Fare Vāna 'a (<http://www.farevanaa.pf/>)
- Puna Reo – Cultural Association, English section too (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070326105133/http://www.punareo.pf/web/index.php?lang=fp>)
- Index cards of [plant](#) and [animal](#) names from the 1960s archived with Kaipuleohone

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